

TRUTH-IN-SENTENCING ELIGIBILITY

As a state with indeterminate sentencing and guidelines which are used to establish a minimum sentence which determines parole/release eligibility, Pennsylvania continues to be eligible for a Truth-in-Sentencing grant. Pennsylvania has a long-standing tradition of truth-in-sentencing, including life sentences. A life prisoner in Pennsylvania can only be paroled if he receives a commutation of that sentence from the Governor.

Pennsylvania has a minimum and maximum sentencing structure. This structure is indeterminate in that once the offender has served his minimum under incarceration, he becomes eligible for parole. However, that parole is discretionary, and under current policy, unlikely to be granted at minimum for **violent** offenders. In BJA's report, **National Assessment of Structured Sentencing**, February 1996, Pennsylvania's sentencing structure is described as indeterminate with a footnote that is partially determinate. The part that is determinate is the part that guarantees that Part 1 violent offenders sentenced to prison in Pennsylvania will serve at least 100% of their minimum sentence established under guidelines or mandatory statutes. Additional descriptive information concerning Pennsylvania's sentencing structure may be found in the October 4, 1996 letter from the Executive Director, Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing, to the Corrections Program Office (Appendix A).

Whether the minimum sentence is established by the guidelines or mandatory statutes, the court has the authority to establish a sentence based on a range defined in statute. The statutory limit within the law refers to the maximum sentence and the minimum sentence cannot exceed one-half of the maximum sentence. The mandatory minimum sentence laws obviously limit that range by raising the lower limit of the range. However, nothing in the mandatory provisions precludes the court from imposing a longer sentence as long as it is within the range allowable for that offense. The guidelines establish a presumptive range for the minimum sentence based on the seriousness of the current offense and the offender's prior record. The guidelines also include alternative presumptive ranges based on either aggravating or mitigating circumstances if the court finds such circumstances exist. The court also has authority to sentence outside of the presumptive ranges provided the reasons for the departure are specified. Additionally, there are provisions for sentence enhancements based on the use of a deadly weapon or the distribution of a controlled substance to a juvenile or within 1,000 feet of a school.

Once the sentence has been imposed by the court, the parole authority for that offender lies with a separate administrative agency, the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole. The Board has no authority to release offenders prior to the completion of their minimum sentence. They do, however, have absolute release authority at any time between the expiration of the minimum sentence and the expiration of the maximum sentence. The presumptive guidelines used by the court not only set the minimum release date which controls when the Board may consider an offender for parole, but are also used in release consideration. If the minimum sentence imposed is less than the presumptive sentence range, the Board will give careful consideration as to why the court imposed such a sentence and may consider it a negative factor in the release decision. As a result of changes in Board membership, the current Board has not yet formalized many of

EXHIBIT Z

the policy revisions they adopted as part of a major overhaul of Board policy. They are currently involved in a project to formalize much of that policy by developing official decision making guidelines.

The fact that no offender receiving a state prison sentence can be paroled prior to the completion of his or her minimum sentence, is precisely why Pennsylvania has truth-in-sentencing. The sentence imposed by the court must be served. Pennsylvania has no good time or other provision to allow parole release prior to the expiration of that sentence.

The only exception to the application of sentencing guidelines for Part 1 violent offenders is that some of these offenders are subject to mandatory sentences based primarily on a prior record or the use of a firearm in the commission of the offense. However, the requirement that the offender serve his minimum sentence remains and those offenders cannot be paroled prior to expiration of the minimum sentence. As a result of recent revisions of the sentencing guidelines, the majority of mandatory minimum sentences are within the presumptive range of the guidelines and longer sentences may be imposed under the guidelines. The mandatories have made compliance with guidelines mandatory for certain violent offenses instead of simply establishing presumptive ranges. A summary of the changes in the sentencing guidelines, which took effect on June 13, 1997, is contained in Appendix B.

The following table shows the number of Part 1 violent offenders released from prison for 1994 through 2000 and the total average percent of minimum sentence served by those offenders. The percent of minimum excludes lifers and capital cases in that they are not released, prisoners who have died, or prisoners who have had their sentence and/or conviction overturned on appeal.

**AVERAGE PERCENT OF MINIMUM SENTENCE SERVED FOR
PART 1 VIOLENT OFFENDERS RELEASED FROM PA DOC 1994-2000**

| | <u>1994</u> | <u>1995</u> | <u>1996</u> | <u>1997</u> | <u>1998</u> | <u>1999</u> | <u>2000</u> |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Number of Releases | 1,069 | 522 | 563 | 1,300 | 1,210 | 1,661 | 1,599 |
| Percent of Minimum Served | 113.5% | 122.5% | 125.5% | 144.3% | 129.3% | 141.1% | 139.6% |

As part of our effort to monitor Pennsylvania's continuing compliance with truth-in-sentencing, we will provide the above statistics for future years as they become available. However, the percent of minimum sentence served is very likely to increase as the effects of new parole policies are felt and without a major change in statute, the percent of minimum served cannot fall below 100% for any individual violent offender, and therefore the average percentage will always exceed 100%.

EXHIBIT Z